Bard College to Launch ‘Microcollege,’ Targeting Low-Income Applicants

The satellite—at Brooklyn Public Library—will aim to make college possible for those who can’t afford college or have gone through personal hardships.

Craig Wilder, Professor of History at MIT, lectured on the entwined histories of slavery and education in Brooklyn, and a panel of Bard alum and faculty answered questions from prospective students, at the main branch of the Brooklyn Public Library on Saturday. PHOTO:GREGG RICHARDS
By
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The maximum-security inmates who beat a Harvard College team in a debate two years ago put a national spotlight on the prisoners’ ambitious college program, the Bard Prison Initiative. Now Bard College is launching a new satellite in another site that bucks tradition: the Brooklyn Public Library in Prospect Heights.

The “microcollege” will be free for students, and aims to attract talented low-income applicants who haven’t sought degrees due to the pricetag or personal hardships. The experiment aims to find ways to make college possible for people who are often discouraged, excluded or underestimated.

“The way we go about college access in the U.S. is a catastrophic failure,” said Max Kenner, vice president for institutional initiatives at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson. “Everyone in higher education has to be more imaginative and daring in thinking outside conventional ideas about how to locate and engage students.”

Mr. Kenner, who also runs the Bard Prison Initiative, said the Brooklyn program was inspired partly by his frustration that so many people were surprised by the intellectual power of prison inmates. “Everyone was amazed,” he said. “We were subject to many jokes in which the punchline is something about a captive audience.”

The new microcollege is modeled on the prison program: Bard faculty will teach small seminars leading to a two-year associates degree in liberal arts, with the hope that students will go on to get bachelors degrees elsewhere.

Organizers plan to open “Bard at Brooklyn Public Library” in January with 16 students from the borough, and grow to about 64 over time. They are now seeking applicants by promoting it through employers of low-wage workers and community groups, including services for the homeless and people aging out of foster care.
Applicants won’t submit transcripts or test scores. Instead, they will have interviews and write essays at the library. The state Board of Regents has accredited the program, which will be funded by a $450,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Pell grants.

“We’re looking for students we think will go the distance and stick with it,” said Linda Johnson, president of the Brooklyn Public Library. “We’re hoping we will not only change the trajectory of a student’s life but the life of a community.”

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